

**How does John Cage's notion of chance in Silence
(1961) compare to Bergson's in Two Sources of
Morality and Religion (1932)?**

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Research Practice Essay

Chance has been defined as luck, superstition, risk, probability and accidental. The historical narrative of chance is of intelligent minds trying to grasp the uncertain and use it to their advantage (Everett, 2008, p. 6). Chance is a force that humans seek to control, in the forms of risk and gambling (p. 4). While these tactics were medieval and unknown, they had a great relation to sacred texts and literature where chance was used as a communication with a greater power (p. 5). It was used to determine justice in the judicial system, for entertainment, and other means to demonstrate favour with the gods (p. 5). These days, chance has evolved systems to combat the uncertain, for example using risk assessment to preserve human life and probability in mathematics (p. 6).

John Cage's use of chance in music gives us an insight into a world of experience and aesthetic. Cage, a notable avant-garde minimalist, often incorporates "natural" sounds or environmental sounds into his works (Piekut, 2013, p. 134). In his book *Silence* (1939), he presents his way of using chance operations to best depict the natural behaviour of sounds (p. 2). Another view of chance is presented by Henri Bergson in *Two Sources of Morality and Religion* (1935). He views chance as an unexpected catalyst that derails any plan, no matter how well thought out (p. 121). Chance is the gap between what is known and what will happen - an uncertainty. This essay will analyse the notion of chance according to John Cage and Henri Bergson, and how these notions of chance complement each other. Then, consider the significance of human life as a flux, the past as it flows into the present and shapes the future. Finally, discovering the nature of art brought out by human significance and intention.

John Cage is a composer and a philosopher whose notable compositions and unconventional methods are widely acclaimed (Pritchett, 1993, p. 2). Cage studied with Arnold Schoenberg along with other religious teachers and literature, which informed his philosophy of chance and his use of silence (Jensen, 2009, p. 97). An example would be Cage's piece 4' 33", the silent piece, where the tacet features in scheduled, meditative sections imploring the listener to listen to the sounds as they are. James Pritchett (1993), notes that Cage's view of chance was saturated by religious literature around the ideas of control and randomness (p. 1). Rob Haskins (2014) examines the writings of a Zen mentor of Cage's, D. T. Suzuki, who was a primary influence on Cage's understanding of Zen Buddhism (p. 617). Cage's (1939) philosophy and his compositions put him in two very defined roles - philosopher and composer (p. 3). Jensen (2009) similarly draws on Cage's musical and philosophical influences, asserting the same ideas of control and randomness (p. 97). The following are examples of works that communicate Cage's use of indeterminacy through his philosophy of chance, namely - Music of Changes (1951) and Number Pieces.

Mark Jensen (2009) breaks down Cage's use of chance operations in his 1951 work, Music of Changes (p. 100). Music of Changes (1951), inspired by the I Ching or book of changes, bears a hint of resemblance to the workings of Arnold Schoenberg's twelve tone technique (p. 99). Schoenberg's twelve tone technique is a systemisation to have some control over the random nature of chance which Cage uses in his works as a determinate (p. 99). Cage's book, Silence (1939) lays out his methods of composition

and breaks down the examples of different pieces of music to analyse where the role of indeterminacy is the most effective (p. 3). Cage's indeterminacy encompasses a distinct divide between the categories and roles of composition and performance (Cage, 1939, p. 3). Jensen (2009) cites Pritchett in his article, in regards to Cage's division of compositions into structure, method, form and sonic characteristics of the sound, showing a very structured analysis of indeterminacy used in the most effective way to convey the natural progression of sound (p. 97). Robert Wen (2014) describes the Book of Changes which reads like a book of probability with different combinations (The principle of yin yang and the book of changes, para. 4). This resembles Cage's process in Music of Changes, having a number of probable combinations for the performer to put together (Jensen, 2009, p. 98). The aspect that was left indeterminate in this case was the form that the performer would eventually perform. This enables the listeners, as well as the composer, to have an unpredictable and unique experience as the piece is being performed. Cage's view on chance, in this case, is to allow sounds to take their natural course in spite of the order of structured form.

As Cage's intent becomes more apparent in his works of chance, the degree of randomness seems to take on a form of reason which allows us to ponder on the idea of silence, or lack thereof, through his intention (Fetterman, 2010, p. 71). Both Rob Haskin (2014) and Clemens Gresser (2014) refer to Cage's Number Pieces in relation to the indeterminate and structured silence. These pieces were a prime example of allowing the audience to listen, respond to the piece and showcase nature in the form of chance (Haskin, 2014, p. 617). The idea of structuring silence according to Gresser

(2014), at the beginning of the piece is in itself unconventional (p. 585). The convention for Cage's works were a formal classical setting with performers and a conductor but in this case, the silent sections were executed without a conductor and the entrances seemed at random to the listener without having the score in view (p. 581). As Cage had described in *Silence*, the indeterminacy of the *Number Pieces* was left up to the performer (p. 581). Haskins (2014) suggests a comment by Cage in allowing the silent sections to stand out in dynamic if the active parts were played almost inaudibly (p. 625). Haskins notes that the idea of silence is the equivalent to emptiness or nothingness with positive connotations (p. 617). This meditative view of the indeterminate in silence roots deeply in Cage's understanding of eastern philosophy through the teachings of Suzuki. Cage's view on chance in his *Number Pieces* reflect a desire to build relationships and blur lines, creating connections in music.

Henri Bergson influenced many artists and thinkers with a philosophy asserting a relationship between everything, a seemingly eastern philosophical aesthetic. His response to mechanism and teleology allows us to think beyond the constraints of categories and laws (Bergson, 1935, p. 231). It is important to keep in mind Bergson's idea of time and life, or in his words duration and vital impetus, as we examine his notion of chance (Murray, 2004, p. 83). Bergson's notion of duration is an ever changing, constantly creating process of art and existence (Bergson, 1911, p. 6). In contrast to static clock time, duration is the reality of our existence consisting of uninterrupted change, our past flowing into the present and informing our future (p. 2). As our existence is being created, our attention (intellect) gives us glimpses of artificially

isolated events together with the thoughts and feelings (intuition) that accompany it (p. 3). This resulting state of creating is what Bergson demonstrates as the unforeseen, the uncertain, the unknown and the indeterminate (Bergson, 1935, p. 116).

Bergson's notion of chance is vastly different from the contemporary view. In *Two Sources of Morality and Religion* (1935), static religion informs Bergson's view of chance (p. 118). Adriana Alfaro Altamirano wrote Bergson and the Morality of Uncertainty, an article published 2016, on Bergson's idea of chance in *Two Sources of Morality and Religion* (p. 44). Altamirano analyses that Bergson's view of chance is created by intelligent minds that are able to process into existence the idea of the unexpected (p. 44). Intellect and intuition are subjectively the collective existence or absence of the other, where intelligence seeks to rationalise everything including the inexplicable and intuition is always certain of itself (Altamirano, 2016, p. 44). Static religion assures us from a multitude of uncertainties in life, one of which is the unavoidable sting of death (Altamirano, 2016, p. 44). If such a momentous event as the death of a man, were to require an explanation despite no existence and evidence of foul play, then to explain this death can only be by chance (Lacey, 1989, p. 154). What we can be sure about death is not when or where it will happen but the fact that it will, which makes this the ultimate act of chance (Bergson, 1935, p. 120). Bergson explains that religion is the way intelligence assures the civilised man against fear, particularly the fear of death (p. 127). He mentions in contrast to intellect that intuition does not consider what is uncertain or unforeseen, thus chance does not exist in the intuitive mind (p. 116). Whilst intelligence calls for this consideration, it creates a gap of

uncertainty (Altamirano, 2016, p. 44). The uncertain event is mystical and instinctive in nature to the primitive view (p. 45). The civilised man has brought with time, the importance of the intellect (Bergson, 1935, p. 121). It is intellect that births the existence of significance, and the need for purpose in human intention (Altamirano, 2016, p. 46). So if a man dies by impact of an object that fell out of the sky, it is within human intellect to find means to his death - be it human intention or nature's intention without reason, also known as luck. Intuition, on the other hand, does not consider the unexpected as it requires no explanation in the view of the primitive man (Bergson, 1935, p. 150).

The vital impulse is a force of nature, a cause without intent, a will to live and an instinct for survival (Bergson, 1925, p. 92). Altamirano (2016) notes that Bergson stresses the importance of the vital impulse contrary to "perception" (or thought). This duality and plurality calls for the wholeness of thought as well as the division of action (p. 46). For Bergson (1935), the consideration of life is of importance as the vital impulse is one of duration (p. 92). The vital impulse is a force that moves life forward, a progress we might say, in nature as the sheer will to live (p. 92). This progress is not just of mechanical action but of the innate which leads us from one moment to another (Altamirano, 2016, p. 46). Whilst the vital impulse is the addition of elements and our ability to analyse is its division, intellect and intuition have both been two perspectives of the same reality (Bergson, 1935, p. 94). The necessity for the two perspectives, despite being so extreme are inseparable in time and space (Altamirano, 2016, p. 46).

The vital impulse Bergson urges us to consider, resembles eastern philosophy in a holistic way. Bergson (1935) views life as a whole undivided experience and a relationship with everything (p. 93). Buddhism displays a similar sentiment in a sense of non-being where the understanding of existence is not as an individual but in the holistic “Universal Mind” (Wen, 2014, Chinese Buddhism, para. 13). Some of Buddhism’s main ideas are that there is no constant in the universe, that everything is momentary, and the denial of self (Wen, 2014, Chinese Buddhism, para. 2). Cage’s thought of the dissociation from the human element is likely a semblance of the denial of self, where everything is a part of a whole.

Religion and philosophy are distinct schools of action and thought respectively, even if they occasionally cross into the other (Bergson, 1935, p. 173). Cage’s intention with chance was to demonstrate the nature of sound and allow everyone to be part of the composition process (Gresser, 2014, p. 593). With Buddhism, we see a need for both religion and philosophy to intermingle, creating a balance of both the intellect and intuition that Bergson (1911) describes in terms of the creative mind (p. 45). These philosophical intentions of Cage marrying nature and human are congruent to the eastern philosophy of Buddhism as well as Bergson’s approach to chance and religion.

Both Bergson and Cage’s notion of chance have an inevitable influence of religion. When we consider the derivative source of inspiration, we must also consider what came before those who formed the notion of chance (Altamirano, 2016, p. 46). John Cage (1939) was raised in the Methodist Episcopal Church and had great interest in the

rituals of the Liberal Catholics as they had both eastern and western influences (p. 271). This reflects his amalgamation of eastern and western philosophy in his compositions (Jensen, 2009, p. 97). Henri-Louis Bergson was born into a Jewish family in Paris, 18 October 1859 (Hastoupis, 1948, p. 596). He was born to Jewish parents but studied Catholicism (Brown et al., 1996, p. 67). This influenced Bergson's understanding of religion and how doctrine (static religion) births a radical faith (dynamic religion) (Gontier, 2015, p. 23).

Bergson's chance rivals the definition to that of the contemporary worldview. Bergson implores us that despite the lack of intent behind the chance act, our intellect still finds a place for it (Altamirano, 2016, p. 43). It is human nature to want to find reason and religion is our defence against the uncontrollable, unpredictable earthly force (Bergson, 1935, p. 116). In review, Bergson's (1935) notion of chance is created by intelligence as a defence against the unknown while religion is born of belief and intuition to defend against the crushing truth accompanying intelligence (p. 117). Chance, by default, is irreconcilable with the Christian belief of God's omniscience which quenches the fear of the unknown. Some denominations grasp the certainty with predestination whilst others, a providence. An omniscient God can foresee what will happen and grants assurance against the unknown. An omnipotent God has power over life and death and grants us the assurance that "all things work together for the good" (Romans 8:28, NASB). This intention for the preservation of human life is what religion protects and chance is merely a human concept to those who do not have a belief of preservation to hold on to.

Chance, according to Cage and Bergson, has most definitely been influenced by philosophy. Cage's study of music with Arnold Schoenberg informed his philosophical approaches to composition and its processes, in what Benjamin Piekut (2013) calls a "modernist landscape" (p. 136). This modern ontology was likely reflected in how Cage analysed music and some of his aesthetic emulated that of his teacher, Schoenberg, who developed the twelve tone scale (Cage, 1939, p. 9). Despite the sense of modern ontology, his philosophy showcased postmodern themes of nature and how chance is used to demonstrate the process of nature in uncertainty, which, both coincidentally and purposefully, demonstrates Cage's certainty of the uncertain (Piekut, 2013, p. 135). Jensen (2009) refers to Cage's philosophy as the western view of eastern philosophy (p. 97). Haskins (2014) examines Cage's influence of Zen Buddhism in his compositions to appreciate the simplicity of listening (p. 628). Piekut (2013) divulges on the philosophy Cage used in compositions as nature taking its course (p. 135). Through personal deduction, together with his religious background and his influence in the philosophy of Zen Buddhism, Cage's philosophy reflects a sort of Unitarian Universalism which considers different philosophical ideas from different religions, thus the holistic view through the filter of western thought. The philosophy of the whole in Bergson's duration draws parallels to Cage's philosophy of listening to sounds, being in the moment and connecting people. A similar parallel can be said of these notions of chance - that human significance in the indeterminate calls for meaning.

In *Begin Again* (2010), Kenneth Silverman writes about one of Cage's most notable performances of indeterminacy (p. 152). In 1952, Cage was set to premier his silent

piece, known as 4' 33", at Maverick Concert Hall. As the piece began, the pianist sat at the piano and opened the lid which began the structured time of the tacet in three movements. The audience cheered and booed, some critics walked out and other people met old friends (p. 153). The most interesting thing about the event was Cage's response to the audience about his disappointment with their quality and quantity of disapproval (p. 153). This human interaction in music, despite it being Cage's or not, requires a human element (Piekut, 2013, p.135). Piekut (2013) notes that Cage sought to marry nature and human through his chance operations dealing with change and indeterminacy (p. 134). In contrast, Cage mentions in his book, *Silence* (1939), that the removal of the human element from music would leave us with art (p. 44). This raises the question, can there be art without human significance?

The short answer is, no. Thus far, we have established that chance is used by the civilised man to give reason to the unexpected in the form of human significance or intention (Altamirano, 2016, p. 45; Jensen, 2009, p. 97). Despite the disconnection from the lack of substantial intention, chance is still unavoidably full of human significance (Bergson, 1935, p. 121). If thought was given to the subject involved in an event that seemed to happen "by chance", there would not be the absence of something, for, if "nothing" was to be of importance, it is in fact something (Altamirano, 2016, p.45). Piekut's (2013) analysis of Cage's work was mechanistic in nature which suggests that human significance is necessary for its workings (p. 135). Cage himself divided part of different compositions to demonstrate the function of the indeterminate and how viable it

is in each section (Cage, 1939, p. 3). He broke the compositions down into sections of structure, method, form and the composites of the sound, concluding with the indeterminate being most effectively communicated through the performer in terms of form (p. 3). Despite his desires of portraying chance in an experiential view, Cage himself has had to disassemble different works to analyse where in the work communicates chance at its most natural state (Piekut, 2013, p. 137). In Lorand's (1999) view of Bergson's dualism, Cage would have no chance of experiencing his work as a performer plays it back to him (p. 407). She writes that Bergson's bias towards the intuitive creates a paradox, that the intuitive has a power over the intellect but it is not reciprocal (p. 408). It may seem Bergson has favourable intent towards the intuitive but he does not deny that intelligence is necessary (Bergson, 1935, p. 116). In fact, intellect, which is born of human significance, is what gives meaning to the vital (Altamirano, 2016, p. 45). Stephen Linstead and John Mullarkey (2003) analyse Bergson's works to gather a multiplicitous character of life (p. 11). The dualities that Bergson discusses are extremes to the fact of life which bring about the complexities that branch off in pluralities (p. 11). The consideration of life is necessary, because life is not simple.

Cage's intention behind his chance operations is the idea of unity. Cage is a composer who has influenced his compositions with his philosophy (Pritchett, 1993, p. 2). There is no room for division to set apart the philosopher from the composer as they work as one indistinguishable entity, just as we cannot set apart the human element as it is integrated into the core of art itself. Cage's attempts to marry human and nature are as

difficult as it is to marry the civilised and primitive man (Piekut, 2013, p. 135). The primitive and civilised man are both, in fact, man, and nature is not easily subverted (Altamirano, 2016, p. 44). His process of separating the roles of composer, performer and listener in his analysis makes this division clear that he is operating from an intellectual view (Haskins, 2014, (p. 628). Despite this analysis, his emphasis on structured silence allows the roles to blend together and blur the lines between those he had defined (Gresser, 2014, p. 593). This invites a collaboration between the roles into art and everyday life (Haskins, 2014, p. 626).

In my practice as a musician and artist, chance is evident in many ways. Field recordings do not have a choice of omitting particular sounds as compared to recording and isolating sounds in the studio. Even then, the studio has only a limited reach to which we have control over. As we incorporate life, the more we invite the uncertain and unknown in. The chance operations used coincide with the accidental, the uncertain as well as the indeterminate. Cage left as much control as possible in the hands of the performer to display the effective nature of indeterminacy, which is just short of improvisational. Improvisation is a performance method to leave the composition up to the performer, essentially leaving it to chance. There may be a small element of structure in terms of time or chordal progression but the form and sense of flow is left up to the performer's discretion. Much like Cage, the field recording determines the form of my composition but rather than a live performer with a unique performance each time, I captured the indeterminate in a moment of time. As the music gets heard in different places through different mediums in different spaces, it is still like a whole new

experience in every listen. Other examples of chance operations include mistakes in a performance, a wrong chord, stumbling on a melodic or harmonic line and changing the chord altogether. The conventions of a genre help us predict the way the chordal progression will move to direct the flow of music and some genres have less determinants than others.

Both Cage and Bergson have emphasized the importance of experience in terms of duration. Cage's perspective of music is one of constant change and is meant to be appreciated as a fleeting moment (Haskins, 2014, p. 618). Bergson (1910) agreeably describes the indivisible notion of experience and to be fully immersed in it (p. 100). Both Bergson and Cage's notion of chance are agreeably meaningful. Cage's (1939) lecture on Experimental Music describes the way sounds should be heard in its natural state through life (p. 11). Not dissimilarly, Bergson's (1935) vital impulse calls on us to consider life and its constant flux of change (p. 92).

Chance, regardless of the risks, can be of meaningful intent from the good and a lesson learnt from the bad. It is irrefutable that we require the civilised mindset of our intellect to produce these assurances against fear, more specifically, the fear of the unknown (Bergson, 1935, p. 128). It is also undeniable that we have a primitive mindset called intuition or vital impulse to enable us to react accordingly to life (p. 91). Despite some interjection of the coexistence of both intellect and intuition in its irreversible nature of negative interaction (Lorand, 1999, p. 407), there was never a question about the

intelligent mind reverting into a previous intuitive state, but rather a completely new perspective from an intuitive state of an analytical mind (Bergson, 1911, p. 4).

Perhaps Cage's intended dissociation of the human element from music is in reference to our ability to analyse. Bergson describes melody in *Time and Free Will* (1910), as an "organic whole" unseparated by thought, action, time or space (p. 101). This experience cannot exist with the intellect in full force but it can have a different experience listening to the same piece with intuition in flux, or as Bergson calls it - duration. Cage has an undeniable aesthetic which he cannot deny, if aesthetic was left to our human devices in the operation of decision making. Ultimately, Cage's works of chance were intended to reflect a meditative silence in order to allow sounds to be themselves as well as demonstrate a human togetherness in the creation of music (Gresser, 2014, p. 593). Despite their differences, both thinkers result in similar conclusions of an undivided wholeness in the experience of music as well as life, regardless of the intellectual, divisive forethought that went into the composition. Without human intention, we would not have art as we know it. It is a living, breathing, constantly changing form as art, like chance, is alive with human intention.

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